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(Continued from last week)

As Meriem was brought forth from the darkness of the hut's interior the two men turned, with every appearance of disinterestedness, to glance at her. It was with difficulty that Malblin suppressed an ejaculation of astonishment. The girl's beauty fairly took his breath from him. But instantly he recovered his poise and turned to Kovadoo.

"Well?" he said to the old chief. "Is she not both young and good looking?" asked Kovadoo. "She is not old," replied Malblin. "But, even so, she will be a burden. We did not come from the north after wives. There are more than enough there for us."

Meriem stood looking straight at the white men. She expected nothing from



"Is She Not Both Young and Good Looking?" Asked Kovadoo.

them—they were to her as much enemies as the black men. She hated and feared them all. Malblin spoke to her in Arabic.

"We are friends," he said. "Would you like to have us take you away from here?"

Slowly and dimly, as though from a great distance, recollection of the once familiar tongue returned to her.

"I should like to go free," she said, "and go back to Korak."

"You would like to go with us?" persisted Malblin.

"No," said Meriem.

Malblin turned to Kovadoo. "She does not wish to go with us," he said. "You are men," returned the black. "Can you not take her by force?"

"It would only add to our troubles," replied the Swede. "No, Kovadoo, we do not wish her, though, if you wish to be rid of her, we will take her away because of our friendship for you."

Now, Kovadoo knew that he had made a sale. They wanted her. So he commenced to bargain, and in the end the person of Meriem passed from the possession of the black chieftain into that of the two Swedes in consideration of six yards of American, three empty brass cartridge shells and a shiny new jackknife from New Jersey.

And all but Meriem were more than pleased with the bargain.

Kovadoo stipulated but a single condition, and that was that the Europeans were to leave his village and take the girl with them as early the next morning as they could get started. After the sale he did not hesitate to explain his reasons for this demand. He told them of strenuous attempts of the girl's savage mate to rescue her, and suggested that the sooner they got her out of the country the more likely they were to retain possession of her.

Meriem was again bound and placed under guard, but this time in the tent of the Swedes. Malblin talked to her, trying to persuade her to accompany them willingly. He told her that they would return her to her own village, but when he discovered that she would rather die than go back to the old shack he assured her that they would not take her there—nor, as a matter of fact, had they any intention of so doing.

All that night Meriem lay listening for a signal from Korak. All about the jungle life moved through the darkness. To her sensitive ears came sounds that the others in the camp could not hear, sounds that she interpreted as we might interpret the speech of a friend, but not once came a single note that betokened the presence of Korak. But she knew that he would come. Nothing short of death itself could prevent her Korak from returning to her.

What delayed him, though?

When morning came again and the night had brought no succoring Korak Meriem's faith and loyalty were still unshaken, though misgivings began to assail her as to the safety of her friend. It seemed unbelievable that serious mishap could have overtaken her wonderful Korak, who daily passed unscathed through all the terrors of the jungle. Yet morning came, the morning meal was eaten, the camp broken, and the disreputable safari of the Swedes was again on the move northward with still no sign of the rescue by Korak the girl momentarily expected.

All that day they marched and the next and the next. Nor did Korak

even so much as show himself to the patient little waiter moving, silent and stately, beside her hard captors.

It was on the fourth day that Meriem began definitely to give up hope. Something had happened to Korak. She knew it. He would never come now, and these men would take her away. Presently they would kill her. She would never see her Korak again.

On this day the Swedes rested, for they had marched rapidly and their men were tired. Malblin and Jensen had gone from camp to hunt, taking different directions.

They had been gone about an hour when the door of Meriem's tent was lifted and Malblin entered. His look portended no good to the girl.

Out in the jungle Jensen had brought down two bucks. His hunting had not carried him far afield, nor was he prone to permit it to do so. He was suspicious of Malblin. The very fact that his companion had refused to accompany him and elected instead to hunt alone in another direction would not, under ordinary circumstances, have seemed fraught with sinister suggestion, but Jensen knew Malblin well, and so, having secured meat, he turned immediately back toward camp while his boys brought in his kill.

He had covered about half the return journey when a scream came faintly to his ears from the direction of camp. He halted to listen. It was repeated twice. Then silence.

With a muttered curse Jensen broke into a rapid run. What a fool Malblin was, indeed, thus to chance jeopardizing a fortune!

Further away from camp than Jensen and upon the opposite side an other heard Meriem's screams—a stranger who was not even aware of the proximity of white men other than himself, a hunter with a handful of sleek black warriors.

He, too, listened intently for a moment. That the voice was that of a woman in distress he could not doubt, and so he also hastened at a run in the direction of the affrighted voice, but he was much farther away than Jensen, so that the latter reached the tent first.

What the Swede found there Jensen no pity within his calloused heart, only anger against his fellow countryman. Meriem was fighting off her attacker. Malblin was showering blows upon her.

Jensen, streaming foul curses upon his erstwhile friend, burst into the tent. Malblin, interrupted, dropped his victim and turned to meet Jensen's infuriated charge.

He whipped a revolver from his hip. Jensen, anticipating the lightning move of the other's hand, drew almost simultaneously, and both men fired at once.

Jensen was still moving toward Malblin at the time, but at the flash of the explosion he stopped. His revolver dropped from nerveless fingers. For a moment he staggered drunkenly. Heberately Malblin put two more bullets into his friend's body at close range.

Even in the midst of the excitement and her terror Meriem found herself wondering at the tenacity of life which the hit man displayed. His eyes were closed, his head dropped forward upon his breast, his hands hung limply before him. Yet still he stood there upon his feet, though he reeled horribly.

It was not until the third bullet had found its mark within his body that he lunged forward upon his face. Then Malblin approached him and, with an oath, kicked him viciously. Then he turned once more to Meriem.

At the same instant the flap of the tent opened silently and a tall white man stood in the aperture. Neither Meriem or Malblin saw the newcomer. The latter's back was toward him, while his eye hid the stranger from Meriem's eye.

He crossed the tent quickly, stepping over Jensen's body. The first intimation Malblin had was a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

He wheeled, to face an utter stranger, a tall, black haired, gray eyed stranger, clad in khaki and pith helmet. Malblin reached for his gun.

But at the flash of the explosion he stopped.

again, but another hand had been quicker than his, and he saw the weapon tossed to the ground at the side of the tent—out of reach.



But at the Flash of the Explosion He Stopped.

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"What is the meaning of this?" The stranger addressed his question to Meriem in a tongue she did not understand. She shook her head and spoke in Arabic. Instantly the man changed his question to that language.

"These men are taking me away from Korak," pointed the girl. "This one would have killed me. The other, who he has just killed, tried to stop him. They were both very bad men, but this one is the worse. If my Korak were here he would kill him. I suppose you are like them, so you will not kill him."

The stranger smiled. "He deserves killing," he said. "There is no doubt of that. Once I should have killed him, but now not. I will see, though, that he does not bother you any more."

He was holding Malblin in a grasp the giant Swede could not break, though he struggled to do so, and he was holding him as easily as Malblin might have held a little child, yet Malblin was a huge man, mightily thwarted. The Swede began to rage and curse. He struck at his captor, only to be twisted about and held at arm's length. Then he shouted to his boys to come and kill the stranger.

In response a dozen strange blacks entered the tent. They, too, were powerful, clean limbed men, not at all like the mangy crew that followed the Swedes.

"We have had enough foolishness," said the stranger to Malblin. "You deserve death, but I am not the law. I know now who you are. I have heard of you before. You and your friend bear a most unsavory reputation. We do not want you in our country. I shall let you go this time, but should you ever return I shall take the law into my own hands. Now, get out, and next time you see me remember who I am," and he spoke a name in the Swede's ear—a name that more effectively subdued the second than many beatings. Then he gave him a push that carried him bodily through the tent doorway, to sprawl upon the turf beyond.

"Now," he said, turning toward Meriem, "who has the key to this thing about your neck?"

The girl pointed to Jensen's body. "He carried it always," she said.

The stranger searched the clothing on the corpse until he came upon the key. A moment more Meriem was free.

"Will you let me go back to my Korak?" she asked.

"I will see that you are returned to your people," the stranger replied. "Who are they, and where is their village?"

He had been eyeing her strange, barbaric garb with wonder. From her speech she was evidently an Arab girl, but he had never before seen one thus clothed.

"Who are your people? Who is Korak?" he asked again.

"Korak! Why, Korak is an ape. I have no other people. Korak and I live in the jungle alone since Aht went to be king of the apes." She had always thus pronounced Aht's name, for so it had sounded to her when first she came with Korak and Aht.

A questioning expression entered the stranger's eyes. He looked at the girl closely.

"So Korak is an ape?" he said. "And what, pray, are you?"

"I am Meriem. I also am an ape."

"Meriem," was the stranger's only oral comment upon this startling announcement. But what he thought might have been partially interpreted through the plying light that entered his eyes. He approached the girl and started to lay his hand upon her forehead. She drew back with a savage little growl. A smile touched his lips.

"You need not fear me," he said. "I shall not harm you. I only wish to discover if you have fever—if you are entirely well. If you are we will set forth in search of Korak."

CHAPTER X.  
Korak's Vengeance.

Meriem looked straight into the keen gray eyes. She must have found there an unquestionable assurance of the honorableness of their owner, for she permitted him to lay his palm upon her forehead and feel her pulse. Apparently she had no fever.

"How long have you been an ape?" asked the man.

"Since I was a little girl, many, many years ago, and Korak came and took me from my father, who was beating me. Since then I have lived in the trees with Korak and Aht."

"Where in the jungle lives Korak?" asked the stranger.

Meriem pointed with a sweep of her hand that took in, generously, half the continent of Africa.

"Could you find your way back to him?"

"I do not know," she replied, "but he will find his way to me."

"Then I have a plan," said the stranger. "I live but a few marches from here. I shall take you home, where my wife will look after you and care for you until we can find Korak or Korak finds us. If he could find you here, he can find you at my village. Is it not so?"

Meriem thought that it was so, but she did not like the idea of not starting immediately back to meet Korak. On the other hand, the man had no intention of permitting this poor, insane child to wander further amid the dangers of the jungle. Whence she had come or what she had undergone he could not guess, but that her Korak and their life among the apes was but a fragment of a disordered mind he could not doubt.

He knew the jungle well, and he knew that men had lived alone and naked among the savage beasts for years, but a frail and slender girl! No, it was not possible.

Together they went outside. Malblin's boys were striking camp in preparation for a hasty departure. The stranger's blacks were conversing with them. Malblin stood at a distance, angry and growling.

The stranger approached one of his own men.

"Find out where they got this girl," he commanded.

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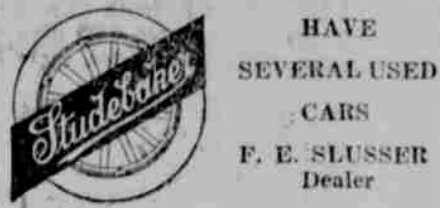
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The negro thus addressed questioned one of Malblin's followers. Presently he returned to his master.

"They bought her from old Kovadoo," he said. "That is all that this fellow will tell me. He pretends that he knows nothing more, and I think that he does not. These two white men were very bad men. They did many things that their boys know not the meanings of. It would be well, Bwana, to kill the other."

"I wish that I might, but a new law is come into this part of the jungle. It is not as it was in the old day, Mu-viri," replied the master.

The stranger remained until Malblin and his safari had disappeared into the jungle toward the north. Meriem, trusting now, stood at his side, Geeka clutched in one slim, brown hand.

They talked together, the man wondering at the faltering Arabic of the girl, but attributing it finally to her defective mentality. Could he have known that years had elapsed since she had used it until she was taken by the Swedes, he would not have wondered that she had half forgotten it.

There was yet another reason why the language of the sheik had thus readily eluded her, but of that reason she herself could not have guessed the truth any better than could the man.

He tried to persuade her to return with him to his "village," as he called it, or "donon" in Arabic, but she was insistent upon searching immediately for Korak. As a last resort he determined to take her with him by force rather than sacrifice her life to the insane hallucination which haunted her. But, being a wise man, he determined to humor her first and then attempt to lead her as he would have her go.

So when they took up their march it was in the direction of the south, though his own ranch lay almost due east.

(Continued next week)

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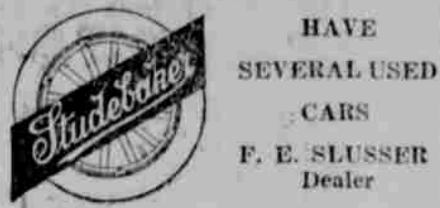
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